

These Westfield churchgoers can go without going



Mrs. Nannie Johnson, right in the comfort of her own home, goes to Sunday School,

by Janie Kuperstock

Every Sunday at 10 a.m., 20 phones on the 351 Westfield telephone exchange ring simultaneously.

Twenty elderly citizens pick up their phones and join in what may be the most unique program in the state of North Carolina.

A Sunday School taught by telephone.

A cheerful voice calls

the roll and, as each member of the class responds, the voice asks how that person is feeling.

"I'm just fine, Wanda," says one.

"Not too good this week, Wanda," says another.

"I have such a terrible headache, I won't be able to join you today, Wanda," says another. "I just wanted to check in with you so you wouldn't worry."

The unique outreach program is sponsored by the Westfield Baptist Church. Five area churches of different denominations use the program.

It offers elderly citizens in the community an opportunity to participate in a Sunday School class when their health will not allow them to attend their regular church.

The class is taught by Wanda Journey, a bright, cheerful woman, who knows what dealing with house and bedridden people is all

about.

She has a 32-year-old invalid daughter, Ronnie Marie, who is mentally and physically handicapped.

Wanda has been teaching the class for 2½ years and finds it a rewarding, uplifting experience.

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Wanda Journey checks in with her home-ridden Sunday School flock.

Telephone church

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"A lady in our church, Mary Ellen Midkiff, read about the idea two years ago and asked me if I would be interested in teaching the class if things could be worked out," Wanda said.

"I told her I would."

Next came the hard part. The telephone company had to order and install special equipment which would ring in each Sunday School member's home at the same time.

"Don Burch, who works for Surry Telephone Corp. spent a lot of time installing the telephones and working out the details," Wanda said.

"He even worked on his own time, on Sundays, to make sure the equipment was working as it should be. He equipped us to handle 20 people at a time," she said.

Wanda says as far as she knows, their telephone ministry program is the only one like it in North Carolina.

She is equipped with a conference phone which

amplifies her voice for those senior citizens who are hard of hearing.

After she calls the roll and asks how everyone is, the class holds prayer, with different individuals in the group praying.

Then Wanda reads a scripture and the class goes into the lesson of the day.

Members are invited to ask questions and make comments, but mostly they remain quiet and listen with gratitude.

"I get caught up in what I'm doing," said Wanda.

"My members tell me they've not been to church, but they've been to preaching!"

All members are supplied with a Sunday School Quarterly and a daily devotional book so they can follow the lesson.

Wanda visits her members and sends them birthday and Christmas cards. If they go to the hospital, she comes with a basket of fruit.

She lets them know that they are still a vital part of God's church, even if they can't make it to the front row anymore.

Most of the members are stroke or heart attack victims. One has diabetes and is partially blind. Wanda says she has four couples who attend the unique Sunday School, and the rest are elderly widows.

"When I go visit them, I'll ask them if that's how they sit when they listen to the lesson. 'Oh, no,' they'll say. 'I make myself comfortable on the bed or couch with a pillow,'" Wanda chuckled.

She recalled one member of the class that has since passed away.

"Her last lesson with us was on her birthday. Her two sisters were visiting, and they were sitting in a circle, passing the phone from one sister to another so they could all hear the lesson. She was so happy," Wanda said.

The class also discusses common friends in the community and how they're getting along so that class members do not feel they are losing touch with the community.

And sometimes, they are well enough to go to church. When this happens,

they usually stay home just long enough to answer their call and inform Wanda that they're going to church that morning.

"The class fills a void in the life of our senior citizens," Wanda said.

"It offers them a spiritual outlet."

Class member, Nannie Johnson, 84, of Westfield said:

"I enjoy our class so much. It gives me an opportunity to attend Sunday School which I otherwise could not do."

Westfield Baptist Church is planning to sponsor another class with 20 members if enough interested senior citizens in the 351 telephone exchange area merit it.

If you would be interested in joining such a class, you may contact Wanda at 351-2128.

"I don't mind admitting there is a special bond between us," Wanda said. "It is a special privilege for me to teach this class. I am growing spiritually because of them."

"We are truly ministering to one another."